AETC News Clips
Air Force Times

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WWII feel, new-car smell

By Robert F. Dorr

The new T-6A Texan II primary trainer had a long, lean look that dwarfed the maintainers and pilots around it as it sat under a canopy on the flight line at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, on Jan. 6.

Maj. Sean C. Hook and Capt. Jeff P. Stift, both big guys, looked small as they strapped into the seats of their T-6A.

The T-6A is bigger, or at least longer, than you'd think: With a fuselage length of 33 feet, 5 inches, the T-6A is more than 7 feet longer than the T-34A Mentor trainer of the 1950s and more than a foot longer than the P-51D Mustang fighter of World War II.

I watched Hook and Stift from the back seat of the next T-6A on the flight line. I was preparing to go up for an orientation flight with Lt. Col. Carey McKinney. Hook and Stift would fly the second T-6A in formation with McKinney, our two aircraft operating with the radio call signs Spur 6 and Spur 7.

Did I say the T-6A was new? McKinney helped me connect to the ejection seat and oxygen lines in the back seat of aircraft number 04-3734, which had just six hours on the airframe after being delivered from the factory only days earlier. In an Air Force with an aging fleet of aircraft, this plane had that new-car smell.

I was flying with the 558th Flying Training Squadron, the "Phantom Knights," commanded by Lt. Col. Michael Pipan. The squadron trains T-6A instructors.

Pilots say the T-6A takes off gently and lands fast and hard. They say the controls can seem a little stiff. They also say it's a superbly designed airplane for primary training. It's a tandem, two-seat, single-engine turboprop that feels a lot like a fast jet. As in a jet, you fly the T-6A while sitting on an ejection seat, wearing a helmet, oxygen and a G-suit.

We taxied out and were cleared to take off. We made a two-ship formation takeoff and turned quickly out of the airfield pattern. McKinney took us to a training area and demonstrated maneuvers in formation with the other T-6A.

The plane was agile and responsive. It's a trainer, but with just a little imagination, it can feel like a World War II fighter.

Almost a decade ago, I flew in the front seat of a T-6A demonstrator at the Raytheon factory in Wichita, Kan., and wrote at the time that the plane seemed promising.

This time, viewing the world from the back seat, I felt the T-6A was everything it ought to be. The cockpit isn't the roomiest in the world, but instruments and controls are sensibly arranged. Visibility is superb.

The Air Force has about 240 T-6As and the service expects the total will reach 454 by 2010, with each costing $4.2 million.

The T-6A has been making a solid contribution since it began training student pilots at Moody Air Force Base, Ga., in October 2001. Eventually, it will replace the aging T-37B "Tweet." Outside the Air Force, the T-6A also is used to train naval aviators.

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My flight in the brand-new 04-3734 didn't explore the full range of the plane's capabilities, in part to spare this back-seater any discomfort. After separating from the other T-6A, we did some maneuvering near Randolph and then returned for a fast but straightforward landing.

The experience, rare for an outsider, of flying an Air Force aircraft would have been spoiled if my helmet had been too tight or if the oxygen mask had chafed. But there were no such issues, thanks to the experts in the 558th squadron's life-support shop, led by John Bock and including Edward Scribner and Senior Airman Svenson Celestin. In Air Training Command units, many life-support specialists are Air Force civilians like Bock and Scribner. They do a great job when pilots are "stepping" — assembling their gear and preparing to go to their aircraft.

Aircraft procurement programs tend to invite controversy, but the T-6A has become part of the Air Force without receiving much notice.

Lt. Col. Jimmy Donohue, operations officer for the 558th, praised the T-6A, saying Air Force pilots who are training to instruct in the aircraft find it easy to transition from other planes. Flight surgeon Lt. Col. Robert Lehman said he was impressed with its agility and responsiveness.

The T-6A program isn't perfect, but it is a low-key success story. The men and women who maintain, support and fly the T-6A Texan II — and those who start the journey toward winning wings in it — are doing a great job for all of us.

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AETC News Clips
Sheppard AFB, Texas

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Base trying to be bird-proof

Efforts continue to keep planes, pilots and animals out of harm's way

By Michael Hines/Times Record News
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Sheppard Air Force Base is not for the birds.

Efforts continued this week to rid the runways of wayward wingers, said Tim Hunter, base agronomist.

Thousands of birds have been killed so far, said Capt. Ryan Porterfield with the Bird Aircraft Strike Hazard (BASH) program. Last year saw about 7,000 birds killed. The issue is one of safety, Hunter said.

"These birds fly into our flight lines, and we have big migrations," he said. "Civilian aircraft use these runways also."

BASH aims at reducing wildlife hazards to aircraft operations. The team keeps birds from harming pilots and wrecking expensive aircraft.

"A lot of locations have the same problem," Porterfield said.

Planes are in danger of hitting smaller birds on takeoff. Low altitudes are where birds such as turkey vultures, hawks become a problem. Grackles and starlings are also worrisome, the two men said.

"When we start having more calls from flying operations," that prompts the measurers, Hunter said. "You just have to play it by ear to some degree."

The Air Force analyzes and compares bird habitat, migration and breeding characteristics, along with environmental data. Several resources aim at preventing bird-related accidents, such as modifying food, water and cover the animals use.

The BASH team has installed nets in aircraft hangers to curb nesting. Grass is kept short and trees are trimmed by runways. Nearby farmers are asked to change planting times or alter other practices that tend to lure birds to the area.

Other options include shooting off propane cannons, firing pyrotechnics and an occasional bird hunt.

"The flying operations are the major thing to trigger this," Hunter said.

From a dented wing to a broken windshield, damage can be extensive. Birds can hit a plane's engine and break blades, blasting metal shards through the equipment. The base sees an average of 65 bird strikes annually. Such accidents caused $300,000 worth of damage in 2005. Bird crashes have destroyed eight engines.

The last fatal crash caused by a bird at SAFB was in 1985.

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Some folks may even want more aerial assaults.

"A lot of time, people will call and complain about birds nesting and the droppings," Hunter said. "That doesn't necessarily trigger a control measure."

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